**VANTAGE POINT:**

**THREE VIEWS OF A MIRACLE**

**(Matthew 14:13-21)**

In 2008 a motion pictured was released entitled *Vantage Point.* It told the story of an assassination attempt on the life of the President of the United States while he was abroad. As the story was unfolding, suddenly, everything was quickly rewound, and all those events were replayed again, but this time from a different vantage point. This rewinding and replaying happened 8 separate times, and each time when the story was re-enacted, a little bit more was added until the full story was told.

There are many times in life that we fail to understand what is going on because we are viewing the events from a vantage point that does not permit complete understanding. If you are in your car, and suddenly the flow of traffic slows to a creep or a complete stop, you are in a traffic jam. You begin to wonder, “What is going on up there? Are the cars ahead having to merge to one lane? Has there been an accident? What’s the deal?” You don’t know because you have a poor vantage point—sitting low in a car behind a semi-truck, one-half a mile from the bottleneck.

To better our understanding, we often have to improve our vantage point. Let’s suppose that you were in a helicopter, several hundreds of feet up above the highway. From that vantage point you would be able to see exactly what was taking place.

The tickets that command the most money at football games are the ones for the 50-yard line. That is a great vantage point from which to watch a game. Some of the most inexpensive tickets are for the endzone. If you are behind the endzone, down low, you can hardly see anything. If the teams are on the other end of the field, forget it. You’ve gotta watch the game on the jumbo-tron, the video board, rather than watching the field.

If you are up high and in the endzone, however, that’s not too bad. You get a good view of the secondary, the pass routes the receivers are running and the defensive schemes that are being used. The vantage point from which you watch a football game is very important.

I particularly like the vantage point that allows me to run to the refrigerator during commercials and the bathroom on time-outs. I get to recline, don’t have to worry about some loud-mouth spilling his beer me, and I don’t have to fight the traffic to get back home. That’s the vantage point I like.

When we look upon biblical passages, we may fear that we have a poor vantage point because we are separated from those events by much time and great distance. Those events happened long, long ago in a land far, far away. We need to keep in mind, however, that we are dealing with an inspired text, a divinely inspired text.

I happen to preach from the ESV, the English Standard Version, but every Sunday I preach from a living Bible. We read in Hebrews 4:12, “the word of God is living and active.” We don’t read the word of God as a dispassionate observer removed from the events by two millennia or more. The Holy Spirit brings us up close and personal to the events described in the Bible.

I have found, however, that the passages are brought into greater focus when I read it through the eyes of each person in the text. For instance, when I read the story of the prodigal son that Jesus told, I want to think about what the younger son was thinking and feeling, what the waiting father was thinking, and feeling, and also what the self-righteous older brother was thinking and feeling. I suppose there might even be some value to consider the parable for the prodigal son from the vantage point of the fattened calf. How did he feel about the return of the prodigal son? For him, this was not good news.

Today, we are going to look at what is arguably the most well-known miracle Jesus performed, and we are going to do so from three separate vantage points.

Apart from Jesus’ resurrection, there is only one miracle Jesus performed that shows up in all four gospel accounts—just one. It is not the changing of water into wine; it is not the raising of Lazarus from the dead; it is not the stilling of a storm, or walking on water. The only miracle that is covered by all four gospel writers is the feeding of the 5000. Keep in mind that the number 5000 only refers to how many men were present. We don’t know what the number would have been when you stop to add in the children and the women. It might swell to 10,000 or 15,000. We just don’t know, but we know it would be a lot.

We are going to look primarily at Matthew’s account in Matthew 14:13-21. We are going to look at this story through the eyes of the crowd, the disciples, and Jesus. We are going to view the story from three different vantage points.

**Vantage Point #1: THE PEOPLE’S VIEW**

**Consider What They Saw, Felt, and Wanted.**

Some of the people saw Jesus and His disciples get into a boat. Somehow, they knew where Jesus and the twelve were going. Word spread quickly. You can walk on land as fast or faster than you can lazily row a boat. I am sure the disciples were taking their time making their way across the lake. They weren’t in a hurry. They were enjoying their time out on the water. Luke tells us in his gospel account that Jesus and His band of disciples were headed to Bethsaida for some needed R & R. Bethsaida was a sleepy fishing village from which Peter, Andrew, and Philip all came.

Gossip spreads quickly, and by the time Jesus and His disciples pull ashore, there is a throng of people waiting on their arrival.

What was there about Jesus that attracted the people to Him? What did they see in this carpenter turned itinerant teacher and preacher?

I submit to you that they saw within Jesus **a man who cared** and **a man who was capable.** When you find someone who truly cares about you and who is capable of improving your lot in life, you too, will gravitate toward that person.

I think we get a hint of what was happening if we look back at Matthew 4:23-25. Notice also what happens at the end of 14:34-36.

You and I live in modern America. Even though we may have what we call a health care crisis, it is really a health insurance crisis. We actually have a great deal of quality in our health care. Doctor’s can usually diagnose what ails you with a great deal of precision. We have knowledgeable nurses, state-of-the-art facilities, and say what you will about the large pharmaceutical industry, they do a good job of making medicines that will help you live longer, healthier, more productive lives.

Contrast that with what the people in Jesus’ day faced. There were no emergency rooms, no board-certified doctors, no healthcare industry, no drug companies, and miracle drugs were still centuries and centuries away.

They saw in the Person of Jesus someone who cared for them and who had the ability to heal either their diseases or those of their loved ones. They went to Him because they wanted to be made well.

There was an occasion when a blind man was calling out to Jesus, and Jesus called the blind man to His side. Jesus asked the blind man, “What do you want Me to do for you?” (Mark 10:51). If Jesus were to ask you that question, what would your answer be? What do you want to Jesus to do on your behalf?

We often think poorly of the crowds. We view them as uneducated, easily swayed, fickle, and being all about themselves. Sounds an awful lot like us, to me. Here is something they rightly understood and something we can learn from them—Jesus cares and Jesus is capable. Go to Him. Call to Him. Ask Him to do for you what no one else could and what no one else will.

**Vantage Point #2:** **THE DISCPLE’S VIEW**

**Consider What They Saw, Felt, and Learned.**

Can you imagine the faces of those disciples when they saw the multitude of people who had gathered on the shore waiting for the arrival of their Master? They were ready for some downtime. Mark and Luke place this story right after Jesus had sent the twelve out of mission. They had gone through all the villages of Galilee preaching, teaching, and healing. They are ready for a siesta with Jesus. They don’t want to be bothered with the crowds; they want some face-time with their Lord.

So, you know what they saw when they saw all those people? They saw a problem, an interruption. They pitied themselves more than they pitied the people because their plans were being messed with. Don’t you just hate it when people throw a wrench in your plans?

As the day wore on, as they sun was getting closer to the westward horizon, they saw another problem. They realized the people hadn’t had anything to eat. The easiest way to solve this problem was to not make it their problem. If Jesus would just send the people away, then the disciples would be relieved of the responsibility of having to do something on their behalf. Just let the people fend for themselves.

There are many folks in church who have adopted what I would call the Little Bo Peep philosophy of church ministry. Do you remember the nursery rhyme?

Little Bo Peep has lost her sheep

And doesn’t know where to find them.

Leave them alone and they’ll come home,

Wagging their tails behind them.

We mistakenly think that if we leave absent church members alone that somehow, they will make their way back to church and back to the Lord all by themselves. I have not found that to work very often.

Jesus advised a different tactic. He told a story about one sheep that was straying. The shepherd left the 99 and went out looking for the one lost sheep.

I imagine there is much the disciples learned the day that Jesus fed a multitude with five pieces of bread and a couple of fish. I would say, the major thing they learned is that **little is much when God is in it.**

Jesus said, “There is no reason to send the people away. You feed them.” I wonder what they thought. Maybe they thought Jesus was joking with them. I can imagine one of them saying, “That’s a good one Jesus. That’s funny.” But then they noticed that Jesus wasn’t laughing. He was serious.

From John’s gospel we know that Philip did some quick, mental mathematics. “Let’s see, 15,000 people, a couple of $1 meal deals per person, carry the one . . . Judas, how much do we have in the money bag?” Judas answers, and Philip says, “No, Jesus we don’t have enough money to feed all these people. Besides, we are out here in the countryside, not a single fast food business in sight.”

Jesus asked, “Well, what do you got?” They began to scrounge around. John is the only one who tells where they got the bread and fish. It came from a little boy. Possibly his mother sent him off from home that day with a Jewish happy meal. He, trustingly, gave it to the disciples. The disciples, with great doubt, gave it to Jesus.

According to David Dykes, Jesus took that little happy meal, and He supersized it. He supersized it big time.

The disciples didn’t give Jesus much to work with, but they did give him all they had, and Jesus did a mighty miracle with what He was given.

We would do well to consider what we have that we can give back to God. Consider the OT story where **God** says to Moses, “What’s that you got there in your hand, Moses?”

**Moses** replies, “Well, it’s just my walking stick.”

**God:** “Throw it down, Moses.”

**Moses:** “God, I’ve had this stick a long time. I fashioned it from a tree branch and polished it all up myself. I’m kind of partial to it.”

**God:** “Throw it down on the ground, Moses.”

Moses tossed it to the ground, and you remember what happened. It became a snake, a scary desert snake.

**God:** “Pick up the snake, Moses. Pick it up by the tail.”

**Moses:** “Uh, God, you must not be from around here. Are you? It’s not a good idea to pick up a snake by the tail They don’t like that.”

**God:** “Pick it up, Moses, by the tail!”

Moses does so, and it becomes a stick again. God used that man and his walking stick, along with his faith and his obedience to work plagues, miracles and liberate His people.

What’s in your hand, church member? Give it to God. Stand back and watch God do much through the little you have that you fully give to Him.

**Vantage Point #3: JESUS’ VIEW:**

**Consider What He Saw, Felt, and Taught.**

Look at v. 14. That verse tells us what Jesus saw and felt. He saw the great crowd, and He had compassion on them. Mark’s gospel gives us a bit more description. It records, “When He went ashore, He saw a great crowd, and He had compassion on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd” (Mark 6:34). What is one thing a shepherd does for his sheep? He feeds them. In the very next sentence, Mark tells us, “And He began to teach them many things.” Jesus fed those hungry sheep the word of God.

Another thing a shepherd does is that he tends to the sick and injured. We are not told of any healing miracles Jesus did that day, but I suspect He did more than a few. It may be that the gospel writers chose not to include those because they knew those miracles would be completely overshadowed by the greater miracle that all the gospel writers recorded—the feeding of the multitude with a meager meal He was given.

Had the disciples been given the task of feeding the crowd with 5 loaves of bread and 2 fish, they would have seen the problem as a mathematical one, and they would have used division. Let’s say there were 15,000 on hand. Their equation would have read: **5 loaves + 2 fish ÷ 15,000 = 1 nibble.**

Had Jesus reduced His miracle to an equation, it would have read: **5 loaves + 2 fish x the power of God = 15,000 full bellies + 12 full baskets.**

The synoptics (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) all say that same thing: “And they all ate and were satisfied.” It seems a bit prim and proper to me? I can see them dabbing the corners of their mouth with a napkin and when offered more saying, “No, thank you. That’s all for me.”

John puts it differently. He writes, “And when they had eaten their fill . . .” He seems to be saying that ate until they were stuffed to the gills. Everyone walked away, moaning and holding their bellies. Still yet, the disciples collected 12 full baskets of leftovers.

There are four specific things that Matthew, Mark, and Luke all tell us that Jesus did.

1. **He Took What Was Given.**
2. **He Blessed What He Had Taken.**
3. **He Broke What He Blessed.**
4. **He Multiplied (and returned) What He Had Blessed.**

In this passage, Jesus is teaching us that He will:

* Take What We Will Give.
* Bless What He Takes.
* Break What He Blesses.
* Multiply and Return What He Breaks.

I think one reason we are hesitant to give God what we have is that we fear Him breaking what we give Him. In our experience, things are ruined when they are broken.

* A broken toy has to be thrown away.
* A broken window has to be replaced.
* A broken relationship might never be replaced.
* A broken bone takes weeks to mend.
* A broken heart even longer.

We don’t like it when things get broken.

While God does not want us to break His covenant or for us to break our word, there does seem to be some broken things that God cherishes. God wants to break our willfulness so that we will submit to Him. David prayed, “The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, You will not despise” (Psalm 51:17).

In John 12 we read a story of something that happened less than a week before Jesus was crucified. Jesus went to the home of His friends, Lazarus, Martha, and Mary. They held a dinner in their home in honor of Jesus. At the dinner, Mary took an expensive perfume or ointment and anointed Jesus’ feet, and then wiped His feet with her hair. John tells us that the entire room was filled with the fragrance of that perfume.

That story became the context for a song that was written by Bill and Gloria Gaither. The song was later covered by Steve Green. Listen to a portion of the lyrics.

One day a plain village woman  
Driven by love for her Lord  
Recklessly poured out a valuable essence  
Disregarding the scorn  
And once it was broken and spilled out  
A fragrance filled all the room  
Like a prisoner released from his shackles  
Like a spirit set free from the tomb  
  
Broken and spilled out  
Just for love of you, Jesus  
My most precious treasure  
Lavished on thee  
Broken and spilled out  
And poured at your feet  
In sweet abandon  
Let me be spilled out  
And used up for Thee

There is something interesting about Mary the sister of Martha. She shows up three times in the gospels, and each time we find her looking at Jesus from the same vantage point—at the feet of Jesus.

In Luke 10, while Martha is busying herself in the kitchen, her sister Mary is sitting at the feet of Jesus listening as He teaches. In John 11, after her brother Lazarus had died and after Jesus had arrived to the funeral four days late, Mary falls at the feet of Jesus. She speaks to Him from a broken, grieving heart. In John 12, after Jesus had raised Lazarus, and while her family is hosting a dinner in Jesus’ honor, Mary sits before Him and anoints His feet with a precious ointment.

The best vantage point from which you and I can see Jesus is at His feet looking up to Him. Don’t look down on Him to judge Him. Don’t stand beside Him as if you are equals. Sit at His feet to hear Him teach you. Fall at His feet when you are grieving. Sit before Him and worship Him. The best vantage point from which to see your Lord is at His feet.